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The Politics of Comparison: Romance at the Edges of Europe*

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Abstract:

This piece offers a comparative reading of the early novel – and the ways in which it has been described – in Polish and Irish literature. Contesting accounts that both traditions 'fail' to develop realism because they cleave uncritically to romance, it examines the generic hybridity of Lady Morgan's *The Wild Irish Girl* and Maria Wirtemberska's *Malwina, czyli domyślność serca* (*Malvina, or the Heart's Intuition*). Reading Polish and Irish literature alongside each other allows us to see that neither is the anomaly it often appears to be in literary criticism. It also re-opens the questions of how we make sense of the relationship between literary works and the socio-political contexts they emerge from.

Keywords: comparative studies, Ireland, novel, Poland, romance

Irish Studies has long had an implicitly comparative dimension, often seeing its cultural output in relation to, and in terms set by, that of its nearest neighbour, Great Britain. Recent years have seen an increased interest in different forms of comparison; in examining Irish writing alongside that of other cultures, be they other colonies, other islands, or other predominantly Catholic nations. New geographical coordinates have the potential to highlight aspects of the tradition that have heretofore received less attention. In particular, Poland has emerged as a fruitful point of comparison, perhaps inspired in part by the massive influx of Polish immigrants to Ireland in the Celtic Tiger years. Poland has a similar status as a largely Catholic, agrarian European nation that suffered intense historical trauma in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and recovered independence after the First World War.

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There are also distinct resemblances between the literary trajectories of the two countries as well: strong traditions of poetry and national theatre, for instance, and an explosion of post/modernist fiction in the twentieth century.

This piece approaches the Poland-Ireland comparison from a somewhat atypical angle, taking as a starting point a feature that is often considered to be a flaw in both traditions: their lack of realist fiction in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. I focus specifically on the early novel, examining how a comparison between the literary works of both places illuminates the ways in which their reception has linked aesthetic form to historical circumstances. In particular, I examine the romantic elements of nineteenth-century novels from Poland and Ireland, and critical responses to them. Simultaneously, I consider how such a comparison is constructed; both its benefits, and the assumptions that ground it, as a way of questioning the nature of comparative studies and how they function in practice. Although a comparison between Poland and Ireland serves to contest the apparent anomalousness of certain features of the nineteenth-century Irish novel (particularly its apparent inability to produce realist works), it also risks reinforcing the sense of these traditions as peripheral in damaging ways.

Irish literary criticism has a long-standing sense of shame or inadequacy about the nineteenth-century Irish novel. As Joe Cleary writes, "Studies of the nineteenth century Irish novel have long been conditioned by the search for the Irish *Middlemarch* and by the attempt to explain why there is not one" (2007, 48). David Lloyd clarifies that this is not simply a sense of inadequacy in comparison with England – it is not only that Irish literature produced no *Middlemarch*, he writes, "it also produced no *Pére Goriot* or *Sentimental Education*, no *Effi Briest*, no *Moby Dick*, no *War and Peace*, *Crime and Punishment* or *Fathers and Sons*" (2005, 230). The implied criticism is clear: Irish literature contains no masterpieces of realism, which is considered to be the most important trend of nineteenth-century writing.

The idea that realism is a natural or obvious outgrowth of any novelistic tradition is not unique to Irish critics; it is a notion arguably as old as the novel itself. Alongside the development of modern prose fiction, we find the rise of a literary criticism that trumpets the view that the novel is a genre that emerges out of the death of the comparatively more crude and simplistic romance[1]. There is a political dimension to these arguments. Socio-historical accounts of the novel's development have linked the rise of realism to the emergence of a strong (Protestant) middle class and the emergence of capitalism[2]. Moreover, in the early nineteenth century, romance was not only considered an older form of writing: it also developed a strong association with

[1] For a wealth of eighteenth-century examples of this kind of argument, see Nixon 2009.

[2] The standard version of this account is to be found in Watt 1957.

the exotic and the pre-modern. Writing in 1824, for instance, Walter Scott explained that a romance was:

> 'a fictitious narrative in prose or verse; the interest of which turns upon marvelous and uncommon incidents;' being thus opposed to the kindred form of the *Novel*, which […] we would rather define as 'a fictitious narrative, differing from the romance, because the events are accommodated to the ordinary train of human events, and the modern state of society'. (in Leerssen 1997, 39)

Realistic fiction is not only associated with everyday occurrences in such an account, but also with modern society, thus implicitly aligning the romantic or marvelous with less developed cultures.

This view persists, to a surprising extent, even today, as recent critiques by Nicholas Paige and Srinivas Aravamudan make clear (Paige 2011; Aravamudan 2012). In "The Rise of Fictionality", Catherine Gallagher writes that "[p]lausible stories are thus the real test for the progress of fictional sophistication in a culture" (2006, 339), and ponders "what it was about early modernity in the first capitalist nation that propagated not just *realist* fiction but realist *fiction*" (245). There is a problematic slippage in such accounts, from a correlation between the development of capitalist society and that of the realist novel (and an understandable interest in the dynamics underlying such a correlation), to a sense that realist fiction is a sign that a given culture has achieved 'sophistication'. This paradigm has implications for theories of the novel's developments in 'minor' or 'peripheral' European traditions as well. In Franco Moretti's "Conjectures on World Literature" (2013), for instance, we find an account of realist fiction developing in the 'centre' and being imported, with difficulty, into the 'periphery'. Though it is accurate to note that realism became the dominant mode of fiction in many places during the nineteenth century, the sense of an opposition between the 'romantic' and the 'novelistic' is overstated[3], and often has a dangerously teleological slant that dismisses 'romance' as a crude and outmoded form of writing.

In his classic *Remembrance and the Imagination*, Joep Leerssen explores the romance-realism dichotomy and its applications to Irish fiction, noting that "the early novel in Ireland appears uncomfortably hybrid if viewed against the background of this genre distinction" (1997, 39). The problem, he argues, is that what is specifically Irish about nineteenth-century Ireland is increasingly seen as its picturesque but antiquated Gaelic roots: the more

[3] Margaret Cohen (1999) has compellingly demonstrated the way that many writers who were considered forefathers of realism continued to rely on strategies associated with romance, even as they seemed to distance themselves from them. Michael McKeon (2002) also describes the continual links between romance and the novel. Sarah Tindal Kareem's (2014) recent book also does much to destabilize this dichotomy.

modern, cosmopolitan side is essentially indistinguishable from England. In other words, to write an 'Irish' novel in the nineteenth century would have required utilizing archaic materials, which are fundamentally incompatible with the conventions of the novel, be it realistic or historical, as a form, thus making the 'Irish novel' as such impossible.

This is a fairly typical account of nineteenth-century Irish writing. Ireland, it is suggested, presents a unique problem for novelists, because its particularities are only appropriate for romance, and cannot be accommodated in the realist mode[4]. The result is that authors are forced to compromise between the two, producing bizarre, unbalanced texts. Thus, for example, Leerssen writes that Lady Morgan "found herself unable to write a historical or realistic novel, and her failure becomes paradigmatic for the century as a whole" (1997, 51). Considered from a perspective that sees the development of the novel as tending towards realism, these novels are perceived as flawed, struggling to strike an impossible balance, and this problem is generalized to encompass the majority of nineteenth-century Irish writing. As Jacqueline Belanger and James Murphy have both pointed out, however, the blame for this is perhaps more rightly attributed to critics who will not consider a novel 'Irish' unless it explicitly announces itself as such, precisely by including these kinds of archaic materials[5].

This is where a comparative perspective is of clear value, as a way of questioning assumptions about what constitutes 'Irish' material, as well as teleologies of the novel's rise. Accordingly, in an effort to ameliorate this image of a failed nineteenth-century tradition, Joe Cleary suggests that the problem is that Irish writing is typically read in relation to that of its nearest neighbour, Britain, and that it might instead be more fruitful to compare it to other "colonial and agrarian peripheries, such as South America or Eastern Europe, which may in fact offer closer parallels to the Irish situation" (2007, 58). Cleary suggests that Irish fiction will appear less anomalous when compared to that of places with similar historical experiences, with the result that the works of its authors will come to seem more typical

[4] One sees a similar idea in Terry Eagleton's account of the Anglo-Irish novel: "[t]he realist novel is the form *par excellence* of settlement and stability, gathering individual lives into an integrated whole; and social conditions in Ireland hardly lent themselves to any such sanguine reconciliation" (1995, 147).

[5] Murphy focuses specifically on scholarship pertaining to later nineteenth-century works, writing that "It is as if novels which do not overtly deal with Irish identity must be read as dealing with it in a covert fashion or not read at all. The approach betrays a secret anxiety about Irish fiction written during the Victorian age, that much of it was not truly Irish at all, but merely the product of an assimilation to British culture" (2011, 5). Jacqueline Belanger points out that works that *do* fit the criteria of realism are dismissed as "English" (2005, 15).

of their time period, and therefore, more respectable. Indeed, in a recent essay on comparative history, Peter Baldwin suggests that this is precisely the benefit that comparative studies can offer. "Comparative history", he writes, "serves primarily to separate the important from the incidental and thus to point the way towards causal explanations" (2004, 18). By examining two environments with distinct similarities, he suggests, we are better able to track which events play a meaningful causal role by determining whether they produced the same effects in both.

Polish literature indeed proves itself a rich site of comparison with Irish writing, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It offers a similar trajectory of Romantic nationalism with a martyrological bent, a tradition of the poet as national bard, an impressively robust national theatre, and a notable lack of realist masterpieces[6]. In fact, comparisons between Poland and Ireland were apparently a commonplace in the nineteenth century, as Ireland struggled against Great Britain, and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth experienced Partition at the hands of the Prussian, Russian, and Austrian Empires (Murphy 2011, 1-2; Earls 2008). Looking more closely at early works of the novelistic tradition in both places allows us to examine and evaluate some of these critical claims about the links between culture and history with greater specificity. We indeed find similar patterns of representation, but the comparative perspective allows us to reassess their broader function and how they fit into larger claims about the development of the novel in both places.

In what follows, I look at two early works from the Irish and Polish novelistic traditions, Lady Morgan's *The Wild Irish Girl* and Maria Wirtemberska's *Malwina, czyli domyślność serca* (*Malvina, or the Heart's Intuition*), considering how we make sense of the similarities between them. On a superficial level, the resemblances between these novels seem to support the view that political struggles generate generic hybridity and render straightforward realism impossible, but a closer look reveals that such accounts rely on anachronistic assumptions about the status of romance. What is more, they have a tendency to collapse different aspects of the works into one large cluster rather than considering them separately, conflating very different narrative concerns into an undifferentiated collection of features seemingly opposed to realism. A perspective that privileges realism has a tendency to see anything outside its confines as aberrational or irrelevant: it does not ask what purpose these features serve. As the realism-focused storyline of the novel's development

[6] The strongest candidate, Bolesław Prus' *Lalka* (*The Doll*, 1890) does not fit uncontroversially into the category of realism. Fredric Jameson, in an essay that opens with a reference to "the heroic stereotype of the Poles as the Irish of the East", argues that historical conditions leave a void in the text, "an open wound left by Poland's subalternity" (2006, 436, 439).

gradually gives way, however, new perspectives on early nineteenth-century texts open up, allowing for a re-evaluation of their complexity, and a more nuanced sense of what they seek to do.

The Wild Irish Girl by Lady Morgan (Sydney Owenson) is emblematic of the kinds of problems that Leerssen perceives in nineteenth-century fiction. In his words, "*The Wild Irish Girl* is a very uneasy blend of fictional narrative and referential discourse" (1997, 55). The novel's plot appears to be a rather convoluted process of uniting its lovers. Horatio, the hero, is a somewhat dissipated young man who is sent to Ireland by his father, with the hope that this temporary banishment will cure him of his indolence. Aware that his family's land was won in the Cromwellian wars, he learns that the former owners, an old Prince and his daughter, Glorvina, are still alive and living nearby. Spying on them one night, he is so mesmerized by Glorvina's singing that he falls from his hiding place and loses consciousness. He awakens in their castle, and is nursed back to health by Glorvina herself. Aware that he would hardly be welcomed if they knew his true identity, he pretends to be an itinerant artist named Henry Mortimer. During his convalescence, he gradually falls in love with Glorvina, and the novel ends with their marriage, preceded by the revelation of his true identity, and the death of her father. Thus, it appears to be a somewhat 'stock' and occasionally overwrought love story, resolved in a cross-cultural marriage meant to symbolize the reconciliation of Britain and Ireland.

But the novel also has an extensive didactic element, which contributes to the sense of generic hybridity of the whole. The process of courtship is simultaneously one of education, for Horatio must not only learn to love Glorvina, he must also shed his prejudices about Ireland. During his recovery, he (and in the process, the reader) receives many lengthy lectures on Irish history and culture, which serve to correct his sense of it as a wild and barbaric place by detailing its venerable ancient roots. This educational element is bolstered by a massive array of footnotes that serves to document, or simply reaffirm, the claims of these lectures for the potentially sceptical reader. This paratext is so extensive, however, as to create the sense of an independent work alongside the main story. Thus, for instance, when the Priest complains that "in [England] it is usual to attach to that class of society in [Ireland] a ferocious disposition amounting to barbarity; but this, with other calumnies, of national indolence, and obstinate ignorance, of want of principle, and want of faith, is unfounded and illiberal", the reader is immediately directed to a lengthy footnote:

> When nature is wounded through all her dearest ties, she must turn on the hand that stabs, and endeavor to wrest the poignard from the grasp that aims at the lifepulse of her heart. And this she will do in obedience to that immutable law, which blends the instinct of self-preservation with every atom of human existence.

> And for this, in less felicitous times, when oppression and sedition succeeded alternately to each other, was the name of Irishman, blended with the horrible epithet of cruel. (Owenson 1855, 81-82)

The footnote continues on for nearly an entire page, discussing Wexford, and arguing that the violence committed there can actually be attributed to the fact that the area was so thoroughly colonized by the British that all contact with Irish culture was lost. It is the British, in other words, who are barbaric and cruel, not the Irish. But this is a message for the reader alone: Horatio, it seems, can be persuaded by simple assertions, whereas Lady Morgan must supplement the Priest's arguments in order to reach a broader audience.

The extended nature of these kinds of footnotes is why a critic such as Leerssen sees the novel as unbalanced and flawed. Ina Ferris has argued that the effect is intentional, serving precisely to disrupt the standard form of the Irish tour common to British fiction of the time. In her reading, the footnotes create "a dynamic of contestation" (2002, 52), destabilizing any sense of a single authoritative perspective. Thus, what one critic sees as a failing, another perceives as an intentional technique serving a specific purpose; not an inability to conform, but a wilful decision not to.

For Leerssen, what is most worthwhile about the book are its more 'realistic' elements, the detailing of Irish life and culture. These are often found in the less polemical footnotes, such as one that explains a casual aside of Glorvina's with a fuller account of the tradition she makes reference to:

> On St. Bridget's day it is usual for the young people to make a long girdle rope of straw, which they carry about to the neighbouring houses, and through it all those persons who have faith in the charm pass nine times, uttering at each time a certain form of prayer in Irish, which they thus conclude: "If I enter this thrice-blessed girdle well, may I come out of it nine times better". (Owenson 1855 [1806], 89)

This is the sort of description that one might think ought to be integrated into the text as part of its tapestry of daily life, but that, in Leerssen's view, is the kind of detail pushed out by the attachment to the romantic mode, which seemingly cannot accommodate it. The romance is mere distraction, an archaic throwback to an older form of writing. "But in the midst of all this passion", he writes, "there is also a discursive element which offers observations on Irish life and antiquity, matters of curiosity and political relevance. These discursive digressions from the fictional storyline obviously represent the novel's real interest" (1997, 55). The obviousness here is highly questionable: if it were indeed the novel's 'real' interest, why include the romance plot at all?

For Ina Ferris, the lover's plot matters because of the way it serves to articulate and explore a set of political issues, "mobilizing the old romance trope of encounter on behalf of very contemporary and civic concerns" (2002, 51).

Claire Connolly offers a similar account, noting, for instance, that "a scene that seems to enact a retreat from reality into the modes of clichéd sentimental fiction […] is also the occasion of an explicit mention of the recent history of the 1798 rebellion" (2011, 96). In other words, these critics argue that the romantic elements of the plot are not 'mere' sentiment, but are doing complex work in the text, serving to encode political meanings and historical problems[7].

While such readings are compelling and persuasive, it should be noted that they also play into a sense that romance is a form that requires validation, implicitly suggesting that it is of worth or interest primarily as an allegory of something else that is of greater importance. Rarely do we find a critical account willing to argue that romance is, quite simply, a worthwhile form that readers enjoyed, or a mode with aesthetic strengths and pleasures of its own. In other words, we remain within the orbit of a perspective that concedes a realist teleology to the novel, overlooking the persistence of romantic tropes even into the present day. This is where a more global perspective can be of service. Becoming aware of romance's strong hold on literary traditions all over the world helps to normalize it, and question the disparaging treatment it receives in many critical histories. Rather than being the product of a specifically Irish nostalgia, we see it as a more widespread form, and one that was considered not only valid, but even noble.

In her opening to *Malwina*, *czyli domyślność serca* (1816 [1815]; *Malvina, or the Heart's Intuition*), Polish author Maria Wirtemberska makes an explicit claim about the merits of romance as a form, arguing that it is an effective way to convey moral lessons. Although she acknowledges that "wiele innych gatunków pism byłyby nad romans użyteczniejszymi" ("many other literary genres might be more socially useful"), she asserts that the lessons found "pod pokrywką zabawy" ("beneath the mantle of entertainment") of romantic works "więcej nieraz przekonywają niżeli suche morały, obnażone z ponęt ciekawość wzbudzających, a do czytania których mało kto się nawet porywa" (1816, 3; "often do more to persuade than do dry moral precepts, stripped bare of the allurements that arouse curiosity and which few feel inspired even to read", trans. by Phillips 2001, 3). That romances are entertaining and enjoyable to readers is taken for granted: Wirtemberska feels the need to defend only their potential social benefits.

Indeed, this way of framing the romance-novel (or romantic-realistic) divide is far more in keeping with the critical debates of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The problem with romances was less that they were unsophisticated than that they were potentially damaging, deluding

[7] Elsewhere I have also discussed the tensions inherent in the novel's seemingly simplistic efforts to resolve cross-cultural tensions with a marriage plot. See Bartoszyńska 2013.

their readers by presenting unreal situations. In her defence of the romance form, *The Progress of Romance* (1785), Clara Reeve acknowledged that they had a clear potential for harm, and that "if read indiscriminately they are at best unprofitable, frequently productive of absurdities in manners and sentiments, sometimes hurtful to good morals", but also argued that the best examples were "truly respectable, works of genius, taste, and utility, capable of improving the manners and morals of mankind" (Reeve 1930 [1785], 7). This should remind us that aesthetic standards are historically contingent and mutable. What is at stake for these authors is demonstrating the social benefits of romance, rather than its sophistication. This realization changes the way we conceptualize the complex negotiations of these works. It suggests that what appears to be an effort to find a way to integrate details of everyday life is part of a different dynamic entirely, namely, an effort to show that prose fiction can be morally beneficial, rather than mere light entertainment. Thus, for instance, footnotes documenting the text's claims can be seen, not as providing otherwise absent realistic detail, but as reiterating its assertions in a non-fictional mode, or anchoring the descriptions in a more established and reputable discourse. This dilemma was not limited to romance, but was a concern for authors of fiction more broadly. In other words, it was not specific claims about Ireland or Poland that required validation *per se*, but fiction itself. Realism was not necessarily equated with moral edification; as Wirtemberska's quote demonstrates, there was a competing sense that romance could potentially be *more* effective in conveying moral lessons than more realistic works.

Indeed, it is clear from Wirtemberska's writing that romance is in no way considered an archaic or outmoded form detached from everyday life, but a wholly respectable and even admirable mode of writing. *Malwina* opens with a Dedicatory Preface from the author in which she writes that the book "przypomni, że nie ma tego rodzaju pisma, do którego język polski nie byłby zdolnym" (1816, 3; "may serve to remind readers, as they leaf through these several pages, that there is no genre of writing of which the Polish language might not be capable", trans. by Phillips 2001, 3). She also explains that whereas earlier romantic works attested to the mores of their own time, *Malwina* would be the first to portray the society of the present day, thus destabilizing the apparent pre/modern dichotomy between the romantic and the novelistic: although romances depicted earlier times, this does not mean they are unable to portray the present effectively. The novel offers the very sort of hybridity that is criticized by Leerssen in his account of nineteenth-century Irish writing, combining a somewhat far-fetched romantic story with lengthy digressions written in a more realistic vein. Examining the specific form of this hybridity helps us rethink assumptions made about nineteenth-century Irish writing as well, particularly the ways in which we make sense of how the different aspects of the texts work together.

Malwina is a love story complicated by a somewhat bizarre plot of mistaken identity, which is resolved by the discovery that what had appeared to be one highly erratic man is in fact two; twin brothers who were separated in their youth when one was kidnapped by gypsies. Unlike *The Wild Irish Girl*, the romance does not serve as a political allegory, but neither is it entirely gratuitous. The vagaries of the plot are underpinned by a broader philosophical question; that of the 'knowledge of the heart', or the nature of love. Malwina is perplexed by the apparent inconstancy of her lover, and her own shifting feelings towards him. The circuitous plot of misplaced twins not only provides intrigue, it also accounts for why her love for one man is apparently mutable, ultimately demonstrating that "serce się nigdy nie omyla" (Wirtemberska 1816, 143; "the heart never errs", trans. by Phillips 2001, 191). Here too, in other words, the romantic elements of the plot are being mobilized towards a more complex philosophical inquiry, not unlike the kinds of deliberations found in *The Princess of Cléves*, *The Man of Feeling*, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and other works of the Sentimental tradition that examine the status of emotion and the dilemmas of the heart.

At the same time, the narrator does not uncritically accept tropes from romance writing. For instance, she critiques the trope of the supposedly fated chance encounters of lovers, explaining that it is in fact unsurprising that two people who are thinking of each other may be drawn to the same locations (Wirtemberska 1816, 28; trans. by Phillips 2001, 36). At other moments, the narrator is winkingly obtuse, pretending to be blind to the attraction the characters feel for each other: "Wtem dochodzili do batu, i na te jego słowa Malwina mimowolnie chwyciła go za rękę, jak żeby się bała, że ją chce porzucić. Ale to zapewne z przezorności było, żeby w wodę nie wpaść; ja przynajmniej tak rozumiem" (25; "They were just getting into the boat, but at these words Malvina involuntarily seized Ludomir's hand as if afraid he was about to forsake her. But this was no doubt merely from caution, lest she fall into the water; at least that is how I understand it", 33). Narratorial intrusions regularly question the story, debating whether Malwina has fallen in love, or requesting the reader's indulgence for what appear to be her flaws. Often, this is prefaced with the claim that Malwina is *not* a romance heroine, but a real person. Indeed, at the most bizarre moments in the story, the ones that seem most obviously indebted to the whimsical turns of romantic fiction, we often find a comment from Malwina's aunt, who is confused because she has never heard of such things happening in the romances she has read. In other words, the novel simultaneously revels in romance and its inherent appeal, and shows itself aware of its shortcomings or indulgences (and gently pokes fun at its fans). Using a curiously ironic narrative voice that balances precariously between satire and sentiment, Wirtemberska manages to have it both ways. But she finds a way to do so while keeping a plotline that is thoroughly romantic in nature.

Though less extensive than what we see in *The Wild Irish Girl*, *Malwina* also offers glimpses of nineteenth-century Polish life, some of which are detailed enough to seem tangential to the narrative. For example, when Malwina goes from house to house collecting money for charity, we are given surprisingly protracted accounts of the various homes she visits, which are clearly meant to offer a cross-section of society. Even more noticeable is a lengthy aside about the specificities of the Polish war-time experience:

Och, nie takie u nas wojny bywają jak po innych krajach, gdzie wola jednego mocarza wysyła w dalekie okolice płatne roty swoje, ażeby małą, a najczęściej niepotrzebną cząstkę kraju jakiego nabyły […] U nas wojsko z ojców, braci, synów, kochanków, przyjaciół złożone, bije się blisko nas, pod naszymi oczyma, bije się o swoją własność, o swoje schronienie, za żony, dzieci, prawa, język i byt swój! (Wirtemberska 1816, 105)

Oh, our wars were not like those of other countries, where the will of one powerful ruler might pack off his mercenaries to distant outposts in order to acquire some tiny, and often quite unnecessary, share of some other country […] with us the army consists of our own fathers, brothers, sons, lover, friends. They fight close to home, before our very eyes. They fight for their own property, for their own place of refuge, for their own wives, children, rights, language, for their very existence! (Trans. by Phillips 2001, 140)

Though this type of detail in Irish fiction is seen as evidence that the books are written with an English readership in mind, Wirtemberska repeatedly makes clear that she is writing for Polish readers. Indeed, she even notes that some of her descriptions are therefore superfluous: "Ale na cóż mam tu powtarzać rozmowę, którą czytelnik łatwo sobie wystawi będąc Polakiem" (109; "But what is the sense of repeating a conversation which the Reader, being Polish, may easily imagine", 144). This pushes back against the sense that the ethnographic detail in Irish writing is always auto-exotic or insistently portraying the home as Other. The detail here is not fraught with the baggage of self-commodification for a foreign audience, but rather, comes across as the author dilating on matters close to her heart, and fostering a sense of community with her readers.

Certainly, these moments demonstrate the author's effort to think through the ways in which the novel as a form can integrate an awareness of the concerns of its contemporary moment. One of the specific challenges Wirtemberska faces is figuring out how to acknowledge the political trauma of the present in an otherwise seemingly light-hearted tale. We find a similar dynamic at work in *The Wild Irish Girl*, which vacillates from the swoons and sighs of the lovers to grim reckonings with Irish history. Although this palpable sense of suffering is seen as an obstacle to realism, it should be noted that it is not exactly 'native' to romance, either. Although the plotlines of romance would seem more amenable to the heightened drama of war, or

melancholic portrayals of ruin, both of these authors pause the action, or step outside the narrative frame (as in Lady Morgan's footnote on Wexford discussed earlier, or Wirtemberska's digression above) in order to give voice to the sufferings of their compatriots. To these two authors at least, then, these moments arguably do *not* naturally fit comfortably into a work of romance: the hybridity of these scenes is not a clash of realism and romance, but is of a different nature entirely.

In both works, we find two different kinds of material that initially registers as tangential or disruptive: expanded ethnographic description or detail, and discussions of historical turbulence, which shift the mood into a tragic (or melodramatic) register. The typical critical response has been to collapse these two aspects into a broader account of how these works fail to achieve realism: they cannot integrate everyday detail properly into the narrative, and political upheaval bars them from achieving normalcy or equanimity. The heterogeneity of these texts is thus used to attest to claims that their political contexts are hostile to realism. But we should be careful about how we make sense of the various kinds of hybridity that we find in these works, and how those different aspects are related to each other. It is tempting to map the mélange of romantic and quotidian elements onto the question of how the novel as a genre manages political turmoil. A closer investigation reveals that they are related to entirely different problematics. What is more, this perspective relies on assumptions about the status of romance that emerged in the wake of realism's ascendance, projecting certain perspectives back onto the texts. Thus, for instance, it construes romance as an archaic and comparatively unsophisticated mode. Both authors, however, use romance plots as a way to engage deeper underlying issues of their own time. It is true that both authors perceive limitations to the romantic mode, but they also seem invested in finding solutions to those shortcomings by working within the romance mode, rather than abandoning it.

It is notable, for instance, that while both novels have happy endings, neither is completely unambiguous. In *The Wild Irish Girl*, the narrative's inexorable progression towards the union of Glorvina and Horatio is suddenly forestalled, a mere 30 pages before the ending, by the revelation that she has been promised to someone else. The other man turns out, astonishingly, to be Horatio's own father. When the truth is revealed, the shock proves too much for Glorvina's father, who is much weakened by illness, and he dies, which in turn sends Glorvina spiralling into madness. The pandemonium is quickly resolved, first between Horatio and his father, and then between the young pair, but when we last see Glorvina, she is on the road to recovery, rather than the picture of a blissful bride: she is "the interesting invalid, whose flushing colour and animated eyes spoke the return of health and happiness; not indeed confirmed – but fed by sanguine hope; such hope as the heart of a mourning child could give to the object of her heart's first pas-

sion" (Owenson 1855 [1806], 203). Similarly, *Malwina*'s joyful conclusion is interrupted, on the final page, by a minor threat, when Ludomir wonders if perhaps his wife does in fact prefer his twin (who, conveniently, has married her sister). Her reassurance, a particular term uttered already at several key moments in the story, satisfies him completely, and the novel's closing lines assure us that all is now well: "To słowo […] odtąd na zawsze moc miało serce jego zupełnie uspokoić napełniając go najprawdziszą i wygasnąć niezdolną szczęśliwością" (Wirtemberska 1816, 152; "That word […] now for the third time – and forever after – was to have the power to reassure his heart completely, filling it with the truest happiness which nothing further could extinguish", trans. by Phillips 2001, 201). But why raise this doubt at all, when the reader was already fairly well assured that all was well? Similarly, why does *The Wild Irish Girl* need to digress into utter pandemonium and madness before the desired marriage can take place? This hesitancy about happy endings again calls into question the apparent obviousness of romance as a choice for these authors. It also demonstrates that both women clearly register the challenges romance faces, and gesture towards its limitations. But they nonetheless *do* progress to those joyful resolutions, rather than breaking with the form completely.

Literary criticism has retrospectively decreed that realism offers the best solutions to the aesthetic problems attendant to the rise of modernity, and thus assumes that nineteenth-century authors dissatisfied with romance were groping towards realism. But this is hardly a foregone conclusion. Rather than seeing Lady Morgan or Wirtemberska as having only made it part of the way towards realism, we should instead consider these works on their own terms, and try to tease out what *they* perceive as the weaknesses of romance, and how they strive to address them. Instead of assuming that both authors fall back upon romantic plots as the only option, we should take seriously the possibility that both saw that type of writing as offering the greatest pleasures to its readers, and that they valued the form and consciously chose it. By doing so, we can also become better readers of those forms, which in turn makes us better able to take seriously and appreciate other works of their time.

Ultimately, part of this process is moving outside the narrow confines of the national comparison. Because the original impetus of considering Polish and Irish works alongside each other is their socio-political resemblances, a comparative reading of two novels from Poland and Ireland will tend to focus on aspects of the text that speak to their political conditions. Because of the strong interest in considering how historical turmoil shaped aesthetic production, the emphasis will be on symptoms of suffering first and foremost. But there are other ways in which we can read the influence of their particular contexts on these works. Given the links between the romantic and the pastoral, for instance, and the fact that both Poland and Ireland were largely agrarian economies, we could also consider how rural life is represented in

both texts. It is unsurprising that the peasantry features more prominently in these novels than in, say, Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*. Although Werther appreciates the simple life of the folk, he also repeatedly registers his difference from them, even when looking to bridge the gap: "Ich weiß wohl, daß wir nicht gleich sind, noch sein können; aber ich halte dafür, daß der, der nötig zu haben glaubt, vom so genannten Pöbel sich zu entfernen, um den Respekt zu erhalten, ebenso tadelhaft ist als ein Feiger, der sich vor seinem Feinde verbirgt, weil er zu unterliegen fürchtet" (Goethe 1825, 10; "I well know that we are not equal, nor can be; but I maintain that he who supposes he must keep his distance from what they call the rabble, to preserve the respect due to him, is as much to blame as a coward who hides from his enemy for fear of being beaten", trans. by Hulse 1989, 28). Or later, "Zwar weiß ich so gut als einer, wie nötig der Unterschied der Stände ist, wie viel Vorteile er mir selbst verschafft: nur soll er mir nicht eben gerade im Wege stehen, wo ich noch ein wenig Freude, einen Schimmer von Glück auf dieser Erde genießen könnte" (1825, 76; "Of course I know as well as anyone that differences of class are necessary, and that they work greatly to my own advantage: but I wish they would not place obstacles in my way when I might enjoy a little pleasure, some scrap of happiness in this world", trans. by Hulse 1989, 130). In contrast, Glorvina "will sit in a smoky cabin four hours together, to talk to the poor" and an old peasant man tells Horatio that "many a time I carried her in these arms, and taught her to bless herself in Irish" (Owenson 1855 [1806], 69-70). In *Malwina,* we similarly learn that Malwina has a strong attachment to a woman named Somorkowa, "gdyż ta wieśniaczka mlekiem ją swoim karmiła i od dzieciństwa jak własną kochała córkę" (Wirtemberska 1816, 7; "for the peasant woman had suckled her with her own milk and loved her as her own daughter since she was a little girl", trans. by Phillips 2001, 11). This is not to say that either of these two novels is a model of cross-class interactions: both texts can certainly be accused of sentimentalized portrayals of the peasantry, and the lower-class characters are clearly of a lesser status. In *The Wild Irish Girl*, the descriptions of these characters, which are delivered from Horatio's perspective, are often dripping with contempt, especially in the early portions of the text, and his father's injunctions to care for the people on the estate on the final pages partake of blatant cultural paternalism. Nonetheless, these people *are* part of the narrative in both novels, and not only do they often receive names, they also frequently step forward to speak for themselves, even if those moments are arguably presenting commodified versions of rural 'authenticity'. There is a greater visibility of rural life in these novels, in other words, which could be due to the socio-economic make-up of both Poland and Ireland, where the lack of a strong middle class made for a different kind of relationship between upper and lower classes, both of whom were dependent on agriculture.

Such a comparison could lead us even further towards a more strictly aesthetic inquiry: why not look for similarities to *Werther*, along with the differences? This could lead to considering, for instance, how the novels deal with minor characters overall, or how they deploy the epistolary form, in contrast to other authors from various parts of the world working in a similar mode. This would be a truly transnational account: moving beyond mapping formal features onto historical conditions, and considering their experiments in more strictly aesthetic terms. This is not to say that we should sever these works from their historical contexts; rather, it is to suggest that we not focus too narrowly on those contexts, so as not to lose sight of the authors' specific aims in producing these works.

A comparative reading of Polish and Irish literary history can very easily serve to both reiterate and reinforce their marginal positions vis-à-vis mainstream European writing. Finding similar conditions of political turmoil in both places, and a similar lack of realism, the answer seems clear: these exceptions prove the rule of socio-cultural explanations of realism's rise. The only redeeming aspect of this account, as James Murphy points out, is that it also paves the way for a celebration of twentieth-century Irish literature, when Irish writers become early innovators of fractured styles of post/modernism (Murphy 2011, 3) – as indeed do Polish writers such as Witold Gombrowicz, Bruno Schulz, Witkacy, or Bruno Jasieński. The literature of the nineteenth century, however, is essentially consigned to the dust-bin of history, with only the occasional meek argument suggesting that it might have value as a precursor to these more interesting later developments. Moreover, the aesthetic aspects of these texts are yoked ever more firmly to historical developments, contributing to deterministic readings that view literature as a reflection of political conditions first and foremost, without examining its formal innovations.

But rather than uncritically adopting paradigms of the novel's development emerging from other literary traditions, we can use a comparative reading of these two literatures in order to decentre those accounts, and challenge their underlying assumptions. The assertive way in which Wirtemberska celebrates romance, for instance, provides a strong counter-argument against the sense that Irish authors turned to it as mere compensation, and brings to light more widespread anxieties about fiction's social benefits, rather than its ability to create realistic portrayals. Looking at these two works alongside each other gives us a more complex sense of the specific forms of their hybridity, and the different dilemmas they were grappling with. Rather than using a comparative reading to strengthen the perception of these traditions as anomalous, in other words, we can use the similarities between them to lend force to counter-arguments proposing alternative accounts of the novel's development, and a more nuanced perception of their aesthetic goals. This comparative reading, in turn, opens onto a broader transnational perspective

on these works. A focus on the socio-political dimensions of the Irish literary tradition impels us towards comparisons to other similar contexts, but we rapidly find that many of the most rewarding insights from such research may instead emerge from a more attentive reading of the formal innovations of the works in question. This, in turn, encourages us to cast a wider net, and to seek out other texts from all over the world that share similar literary concerns. Thus, we arrive at a perspective that would situate nineteenth-century Polish and Irish writing, not only alongside works from similar socio/historical conditions, but together with other romantic or hybrid works they have a natural affinity with. Instead of considering the novels from these traditions in developmental terms, viewing these texts alongside others that dealt with similar formal challenges can help us see them as experiments in literary genre: as efforts to innovate the romance, rather than overcome it.

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